

The New York Times

Afghan President Says U.S. Should See Him as Ally Against Militant Islam

By Edward A. Gargan

Abandoned by his former benefactors in Moscow and cast somewhat adrift in the new politics of the region, Afghanistan's President made an impassioned appeal to the United States today to help his country become a bulwark against the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia.

In an interview here, President Najibullah also pleaded for immediate economic and humanitarian assistance from Washington, which long backed the Afghan fundamentalist guerrillas fighting his Government. He also promised that he would release four Afghans who worked in the United States Embassy and were convicted of espionage in 1983.

The Afghan President's praise for the United States and his attempt to enlist Washington in common cause against fundamentalism marked the sharpest departure yet from the open hostility that has characterized relations between Kabul and Washington since Afghanistan's leftist coup of 1978. *An Uncertain Future*

His appeal reflected not only the loss of support from Moscow and the vastly changed politics of the region but also his sense of uncertainty about his place in a future Afghanistan as well as his acute awareness of his country's desperation.

"We have a common task, Afghanistan, the United States of America, and the civilized world, to launch a joint struggle against fundamentalism," said Mr. Najibullah, who then described what he thought would happen to his country if Islamic extremists took power in Kabul.

"If fundamentalism comes to Afghanistan, war will continue for many more years," he said, the rush of his words repeatedly overwhelming his translator. "Afghanistan will turn into a center of world smuggling for narcotic drugs. Afghanistan will be turned into a center for terrorism." *Support for U.N. Plan*

Mr. Najibullah has promised to support a United Nations plan to summon a wide spectrum of Afghans -- including the Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas -- to a gathering that would lead to a political accord to end Afghanistan's years of civil conflict.

But his call for immediate aid left open to question whether he wants Washington to extend assistance while he is still in power or after a United Nations-sponsored transition from his Government is irreversibly under way. Mr. Najibullah has grown increasingly uneasy about the expected outcome of the United Nations process, which almost certainly would mean

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his removal from office and the dissolution of his Watan, or Homeland Party, the successor to the Soviet-inspired Communist Party he once led.

[In Washington, a senior State Department official said that the United States has long viewed Mr. Najibullah as an obstacle to peace and for that reason has felt that he should leave office, although that is a decision for the Afghans to make. The official, who asked not to be named, said that Mr. Najibullah's plea for funds notwithstanding, Washington already provides large amounts of aid from a humanitarian program administered from Pakistan.

[A department spokesman said there would be no direct public response to the interview.]

After 13 years of war, waged by Islamic rebels against various leftist governments and the Soviet forces, Afghanistan is a country in tatters. The years of conflict have driven six million refugees into Pakistan and Iran, prompted the country's educated classes to migrate to Europe and America and fractured the country along its already fragile ethnic fissures.

With the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in February 1989, virtually all Western nations abandoned their embassies here and ostracized Mr. Najibullah's regime. And then, with the final disintegration of the Soviet Union in December, Afghanistan's last source of economic assistance disappeared. Mr. Najibullah found himself alone in the world, and all but ignored.

In recent months the United Nations peace plan has begun to show signs of life. Pakistan, the principal benefactor of the Afghan guerrillas and the main conduit of Western arms to them, cut off its assistance in late January and said it was supporting the United Nations plan. In doing so, Islamabad abandoned its insistence on installing a fundamentalist government in Kabul, seeking instead a government that could serve as a stable bridge to fruitful economic and political ties with the new Central Asian republics formed from the old Soviet Union. Many leaders in those republics are wary of Islamic fundamentalism.

Some of the fundamentalist guerrillas have condemned the peace efforts, declaring that only the imposition of an Islamic government will bring peace to the country. But others among the splintered guerrilla movement have agreed to participate in the peace efforts.

Mr. Najibullah spoke fervently today of his hopes for a dialogue with the United States, which at one time was shipping hundreds of millions of dollars of weapons to the fundamentalist guerrillas largely in the interest of countering Soviet dominance over the country. Repeatedly during the 40-minute interview, the President echoed a concern underlying the swing through Central Asia last month by Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d -- that Islamic fundamentalism poses a significant threat to stability in the region.

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"You may think that the Central Asian Republics are significant for the United States of America," he said. "That's right. But I must say that the strategic and political significance of Afghanistan is much more than these republics. If Afghanistan is lost and is turned into a center of fundamentalism, you will lose the Central Asian republics."

Mr. Najibullah, a burly man with a brush mustache, spoke in a wood-paneled conference room dominated by a huge map of the country and lighted by a chandelier made up of five glass globes. Dressed in a subdued blue suit and dark blue tie, the president, normally quite reserved in his discussions with journalists, gesticulated frequently, especially during his discussion of his hopes for a renewal of contacts with the United States. 'What Is the Obstacle?'

Most disappointing, the President said, was the refusal of the United States to talk to his Government at any level. The guerrillas, he said, had held talks with the Russian Government in Moscow, and Mr. Baker had visited the newly formed governments in Central Asia, "so what is the obstacle that the United States of America is not opening its embassy in Afghanistan?" he asked.

The last American ambassador to Afghanistan, Adolph Dubs, was killed in 1979 during an attempted kidnapping. Mr. Dubs was never replaced and American representation in Kabul continued at a reduced level until the embassy closed in 1989.

In a gesture intended to demonstrate his sincerity, Mr. Najibullah said that he would offer pardons to four Afghans who worked in the old American embassy. The four were arrested in 1983 and charged with spying for the Central Intelligence Agency. "When we receive a letter from an official source of the Government of the United States of America, we will do this," the President said. "For instance, this letter could be sent through any embassy in the region, or some department in the United States of America, or through Benon Sevon," a reference to the special representative of the United Nations Secretary General to Afghanistan and who is orchestrating the latest peace effort. When asked how long it would be after receiving such a letter that the men would be released, Mr. Najibullah simply said, "Immediately."

American officials have steadfastly denied that the four men -- Ghulam Sakhi Ahmadzai, Jalaludin Talibee, Mohammed Esa and Fazal Ahmad Maulana -- ever engaged in espionage. Several years ago, another embassy employee who also had been imprisoned for spying was traded in a deal for several Afghan officials who were captured in Pakistan.